



# Neighborhood Commercial

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## What is this topic?

At the heart of many of our neighborhoods are the commercial areas that serve nearby residents and often draw other people into the community. The Baltimore City zoning code currently allows for a wide variety of uses in these zones, including residential and office uses.

## How do current approaches impact development and surrounding neighborhoods?

### Uses

- Some commercial areas have an over saturation of uses, including churches in commercial areas.
- Smaller, more compact commercial areas are currently treated the same as larger areas; consider having different categories that might have different mixes of uses.
- Mixed uses can work in some areas, especially on major auto-oriented highways or near transit stations.
- Establishments that sell liquor and minimal amounts of food are a “hole” in the code.
- Consider the type of commercial zoning adjacent to residential but also in a very mixed area such as Fells Point

### Parking

- Shared and rear parking work in some cases but not in others.  
Ex: Shared parking works in Hamilton but not in Pigtown.
- Parking requirements have been difficult to enforce.
- Concerns have been expressed about some of the on-street parking changes, such as reverse angle parking (in Hampden, e.g.) slowing people down too much.

### General

- Mismatch between zoning and existing buildings, history of community, and needs and desires of the community.  
Ex: Live entertainment is excluded on Pennsylvania Ave; need a zone that allows it.

## **What issues with the current approach should TransForm Baltimore help address?**

### Use

- The mix of permitted uses could be tied to whether a neighborhood commercial area is intended to be primarily walk-to or primarily drive-to. Walk-to areas should include uses such as hardware stores, pharmacies, and post offices.
- Flexibility of uses allows creativity and fewer vacant or underutilized stores and buildings.

### Parking

- Revisit the requirement that parking for a building must be within 300 feet.
- Consider requiring more landscaping and better design standards in parking lots.

### Design/Bulk

- Consider adding design standards to protect historic character in some commercial areas.
- FAR jumps from 2.5 to 5; need more variation.
- Parking level should NOT be exempt from FAR.

### General

- Conditional uses/variances should have to be reapproved if particular use changes after the initial approval by BMZA.
- Lot consolidation too easy--leads to buildings being out of scale with existing character and also leads to too much surface parking. Subdivisions get public review and consolidations should also.
- Zoning too broad (too many uses allowed in each category) and too vague (code doesn't define uses well enough).
- Put more emphasis on the nature of the structure, esp. the façade to suggest its use. For example, historic storefronts should be permitted for small businesses.

## **What proposed approaches should be considered during the TransForm Baltimore process?**

### Use

- Expand accessory use categories for more mixed use; a list of supportive or compatible uses might work better than a list of accessory uses in some cases.
- Light industry without excessive noise pollution or other disturbances could work in some commercial areas.
- Mixed uses within larger buildings like grocery stores could be encouraged.
- Size of buildings a factor in the types of businesses a certain area can accommodate.

### Parking

- Current parking requirements for commercial/office uses are based on square footage; it might be better to evaluate based on the number of people working in an establishment.

- Rear parking preferable to parking in front.
- Parking decks preferable to surface parking where there is enough demand; creates security, convenience and gets parking up and off the street.
- Development near transit stops should have different parking standards, requiring fewer spaces to take into account and create incentives for transit use.

#### Design/Bulk

- Setbacks should vary depending on the intensity and compatibility of the use.
- Street widths should be a determining factor in what approach works best for an area.
- Rears of buildings should be more inviting; perhaps better buffers and property addresses should be required in the rears of stores.
- The size of signs is determined by a formula based on the size of the building. Other criteria such as width of street (street type—local, arterial, etc.) and character of neighborhood should be considered.
- Back-lit box signs should be prohibited everywhere in the city.
- There should be height restrictions on pole signs.
- Large signs should not block smaller signs of other businesses.
- Chain link fences should be prohibited along visible streets. Shrubs and plantings should be required along street frontage.

#### General

- Take particular characteristics, needs and desires of community into account when creating and applying zoning classifications.
- Needs to be a balance between flexibility and clear definition; clearly spell out certain uses, ex: check cashing, bail bondsmen, convenience stores.
- Form-based zoning might not be a good solution since so much that matters hinges on uses more than design.
- Corner businesses are often critical to revitalization.
- Residents alone can't support shops and restaurants in most areas; need people coming from outside the community; transit will bring more foot traffic and help compensate for lack of rooftops.
- Need for community control and review of uses.
- For the new code, the language and map should be seen simultaneously and reviewed by the community; rather than approving the book first and the map later, citizens need to be able to see how the code will be applied to certain areas up front.
- Community should have input into specific designs of developments.
- Correct and appropriate zoning should eliminate need for variances; variance process should be more stringent.
- Create a timeframe for mandatory revision of the zoning code (10 yrs?).